**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

**Gary T. Meadors, Th.D.**

**Emeritus Professor of Greek and New Testament**

**Grand Rapids Theological Seminary**

[**www.gmeadors.com**](http://www.gmeadors.com)

**gngmeadors@mac.com**

**LESSON 3: Biblical Covenant Stipulations (Law/s)**

After Genesis establishes the “Family” (Patriarchs in terms of ancient culture) history of Yahweh’s work with his creation, Exodus provides the defining information for Israel. There are three major aspects (Stuart, 168).

1. Israel’s “exodus” from Egypt and their emerging as a distinct nation (Exod 1-18).
2. Israel is distinguished as THE unique people of Yahweh (Exod 33, 40).
3. The defining of Israel as God’s special people at Mount Sinai (Exod 19 to Num 10:10).

In earth history, this MIGRATION was God’s control of history. For thinking people, this migration raises lots of “difficult” questions in the public square. The conquest of Canaan included a genocide of the Canaanites. At this time in history, the entire globe had been (e.g. Hittites) and was involved in migrations of people. On the one hand, it was a natural event, on the other hand, the divine action cannot be explained away. Consequently, biblical theologians provide “creative constructs” to explain these actions.

The “Law” was established to guide the life of this new nation and make it “distinct” within its cultural surroundings (e.g. the anti-idolatry theme; **the holiness codes**…food laws, ritual cleanness, etc.).

“…they [Israel] needed direction as to how they were to be *God’s* people—both in their relationships with each other and in their relationship with God—so that they would shed the ways and culture of Egypt and not adopt the ways and culture of the Canaanites whose land they were to possess.” (168)

“And this is the role of the law in Israel’s history. It was God’s *gift* to his people to establish the ways they were to live in community with one another and to provide for their relationship with and worship of Yahweh, their God. At the same time the law set boundaries with regard to their relationship with the cultures around them.” (169)

Furthermore, what we refer to as “Law/Legal codes,” should be explained in terms of Ancient Near Eastern Covenant structures with its regulations and prohibitions. Before Moses, Abram “cut” a covenant (Gen 15) with the Lord. Covenants are in the genre of ANE TREATIES

**A. Clarification of “Covenant” and “Law”** [See articles in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*]

 1. OT covenants generally follow ANE treaty structure

Ancient covenants (berit) were “a binding **relationship** that is based on commitment, that carries with it promises and obligations, and that has the quality of constancy or durability.” (Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed., 89).

In the ANE you had a variety of covenant structures:

* Parity: an agreement between two equals
* Suzerainty: an agreement between a superior and a inferior; e.g. a King and a Vassal; Yahweh and ?
	+ The structure of a Suzerainty treaty included (see Stein for development):

 Treaty Structure Compare Exodus 20-25; Joshua 24

 Preamble (Identity of Suzerain)

 Historical prologue Exod 20:1-2 ; Josh 24:1-13

 Stipulations 10 Words

 Deposition of treaty document Stored in sacred space

 Listing of witnesses

 Listing of cursings and blessings

 2. **Law** (i.e. covenant stipulations) **is packed within a covenant**/agreement WHICH is packed within a narrative! You cannot have one without the other. **Covenant** is the primary and is a **RELATIONSHIP based.** Law is how the “vassal” demonstrates allegiance to the King.

 3. Covenant events and their “legal” stipulations in the OT

 Covenant\* Text Stipulations

ADAMIC Gen 3:16-19

NOAHIC Gen 6:18 (first mention); cf. 8:1

 9:1-17

ABRAHAMIC Gen 15; Exod 2:23-25

SINAITIC Exod 19:3-24:18 (cf. 2:23-25!)

 NEW Isa 55:3; 59:21; Jer 31:31-34 “…obligations would not be

 32:37-41; Ezek 16:60; 37:26; forcibly imposed but freely

 Hos 2:18[20] embraced due to a transfor-

 mation of the human heart.”

 EDofB, 291

The emergence of the prospect of a “New Covenant” (Jer. 31:31 is only time the exact terminology is used in the OT) fits the entire metanarrative of the failure of God’s people to follow and obey. As prophecy shifts to apocalyptic, the Old Covenant’s failure shifts to the prospect of a “New Covenant” in which God himself will secure ultimate obedience.

 \* All are Suzerainty since Yahweh is the Suzerain in each. [See Meredith Klein, *Treaty of the Great King.*]

 # “Eternal” may mean “human time” and therefore consummated in the Eschaton.

 Terms such as “conditional” and “unconditional” are creative constructs, not ANE/OT terminology.

 4. “Law” Codes

There are three domains of “law” in the OT:

 Ethical (e.g. Exod 20; 34:27-28; Deut 4:13; 10:4),

 Cultic/Ritual (priest, tab/temple, “unclean” like food),

 Civil (order society, casuistic law, social law).

 The treatments of law forms in the OT itself are threefold:

Casuistic law (case law)

Apodictic law (absolute commands)

Ritual law (regulations for “lay” and priest)

 The Ten Words (Apodictic; “Constitutional”)

 The Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:22-23:19)

 20:23-22:16 Casuistic law (only illustrative, not comprehensive)

 22:17-23:19 Apodictic law

 Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26)

 Holiness Code (Lev 17-26; makes Israel different from surrounding nations)

 Priestly Code (Ex 25-31; 34:29 through Lev 16; some items in Numbers)

**Casuistic Law Apodictic Law**

[Conditional] [Unconditional]

Case descriptive, “if…then” No occasional context (absolute, no “case”)

Stipulates consequence Consequences understood as violation

 when case violation of God’s absolute moral dictates

 occurs

Retrospective in outlook Prospective in outlook

May be culturally conditioned Eternal verities

Biblical law is slim and not anywhere near exhaustive; it is suggestive of a worldview from which development can take place. It is “constitutional.”

**B. Practice of Law in Israel was to show holiness by obedience to Yahweh’s values.**

Covenant in the OT defines the ***relationship*** between God and Israel. While a covenant in the ANE may be a binding contract between two parties, the context of covenant in the OT is first based on a **relationship** from which religious community is defined and regulated. To violate a law code was not simply to break a law, it involved violation of relationship to God.

The application of law within the covenant community permeates every category of life. *These categories do not compartmentalize life or law but illustrate that for Israel all of life was religious at its core. All of life was viewed as a relationship with God who wisely and lovingly orders the context of life, some of which requires regulations and guidelines.*

1. Criminal violations
2. Civil regulations
3. Religious practice regulations
4. Family regulations
5. Charitable regulations

**The Law/Covenant stipulations were NEVER related to forensic salvation but to [by NT analogy] sanctification.**

 [For advanced study, see the article on “Covenant Nomism” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.]

**C. The Role of Priest and Prophet and the Law in Redemptive History.**

When one reads the Old Testament in its canonical order, one will observe the slow demise of the Priesthood (which represented God and ran Israel) and its replacement with the Prophets.

**The Prophets’ themes (cf. Amos) reflect preaching against Israel’s failures.** They failed in two major ways: They did not shed themselves from **idolatry** and they were not maintaining the **covenant** stipulations (Law). In a sense, the Prophets were “covenant policemen.” Be conscious of this as you read the Prophets and you will see that although they wrote centuries later than Moses, they are preaching Moses’ texts!

**D. What is the Christian’s relationship and obligation to the OT (and the Law)? [F&S 170ff.]**

 1. Some have said that the Christian is only responsible for the OT when it is repeated in the NT.

 **This is a bad dictum.** It would be better to say “that these OT laws [Ethical] are still binding for the believer unless specifically abrogated in the NT.” (Stein, 107)

While there is a great deal of the OT in the NT including Law texts (more than most have observed), to restrict our responsibility to normative type teaching in the OT that is NOT in the NT would be wrong. The SAME God is in both and, therefore, we need to account particularly for the moral/ethical truth the OT presents directly and by implication (e.g. issues of incest are treated in the OT but not the NT; laborers care texts from OT are used in NT; treatment of the poor and foreigners is debated in today’s culture). We cannot simply dismiss the OT but need a paradigm to determine and mine its normative teaching.

One challenging aspect of OT teaching relates to items that address the “civil” side of Israel. Israel was a nation and therefore required stipulations that are governmental in nature. Many social stipulations relate to national and cultural issues that are not freely transferable. Such items should be treated as descriptive not prescriptive.

 2. Stuart (170—175) makes 6 observations/guidelines about the Christian and the Law. BE CAREFUL with Stuart’s analogies since he is sometimes imaging others rather than himself.

 1a. The OT law is a Suzerain/vassal covenant and **relational** in nature.

 2a. Some say, “The OT is “not our Testament.” **This statement needs to be taken with caution.** While it is true that some of the covenants/laws are exclusively focused on Israel, there is more continuity of the OT with the NT than some Christian scholars have seen. This point and #6 are similar and in keeping with the “repeated” model which many consider truncated.

 3a. Two kinds of Old Covenant (Sinaitic) stipulations have clearly NOT been renewed in the New Covenant. These are CIVIL laws and RITUAL laws. Again, we need to recognize that covenants and law reflect Yahweh’s nature and we do need to probe the meaning they convey (e.g. Capital Punishment is based in the OT). “Social law” is another category that needs consideration (e.g. the poor, foreigners, etc.).

 4a. Part of the Old Covenant is renewed in the New Covenant. Again, **Stuart** notes the ETHICAL laws restated in the NT have relevance. But his **paradigm is too narrow**, especially in this category. He reduces what renews as related to the two great commandments to love God and neighbor. BUT these were the guidelines in the OT!!

 5a. **The whole OT is God’s Word for us although not God’s command to us.**

 6a. Some say, “Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). **Again, this blanket statement is too narrow. Determining normative OT truth requires a more detailed paradigm than mere denial or repetition.**

**PLEASE REMEMBER, the OT Law is first a Covenant that establishes a RELATIONSHIP. Then it is regulating stipulations that SHOW THE VALIDITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP. We (and Jesus!) use this same analogy when we talk about salvation and the fruits of salvation.**

As mentioned before, reading Dictionary articles on subjects is a good way to introduce yourself to biblical themes.

**Excerpt from** *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD) article on “Law”

**4. Covenant.** The laws in the Pentateuch are connected to the concept of the covenant, i.e., of bonds and agreements that were made between God, the sovereign Lord, and Israel, his subject people. The biblical covenants were modeled after the formal agreements or treaties that existed between monarchs and their vassals in the political sphere of the ancient world. Similarities in ceremony and detail have been noted; they include “the cutting of the covenant,” which was accompanied by the slaughter of a sacrificial animal; public assembly; oaths of allegiance or agreement; invocation of the gods, and their curses upon those who violated the oaths or agreements (Weinfeld 1972: 59–146). However, the biblical covenants differ from the ANE treaties in that what were originally stipulations of allegiance or agreement (Josh 24:1–27) became much expanded and transformed into paragraphs of laws and commandments. Through their acceptance of the covenant, these were seen as becoming binding upon the Israelites (Exod 19:4–8; 24:3–8; Deut 5:1–5; 26:16–27:8).

 Covenant is central to the presentation of the pentateuchal laws and commandments. The occasions of making and renewing the covenant became in fact settings for revealing and restating some or all of the laws (2 Kgs 23:1–3; Jer 34:8–22; Ezra 9–10; Nehemiah 9–13). The covenant also carried with it important theological ideas: the divine authority to command; the obligation of Israel to obey; the meting out of reward and punishment for keeping or disobeying the laws; the concept of an awesome but still intimate relationship between God and his people; authority for those individuals or groups who were seen as custodians or teachers of the law; and a continuing, eternal bond between God, the sovereign, and Israel, his vassal.

 The ANE treaties were not used as vehicles for presentation of laws to the population in general. Their stipulations remained rooted in the actual political contexts in which they were written. They deal with political matters of loyalty, dealings with hostile powers, military activity and support, extradition of fugitives, and the like (McCarthy 1978: 82–83, 103, 107–121). There are, of course, also political covenants or treaties in the Bible (Gen 21:22–32; 31:44–54; 1 Kgs 20:34); and these are similar in character to their ANE counterparts. But the concept of a connection between divine covenant and divine law is solely a product of Israelite theology. See also COVENANT.

**Excerpt from** ABD article on “Covenant”

 **3. The “New Covenant.”** The date and authorship of Jeremiah’s remarkable prophecy of a “new covenant” (Jer 31:31–34) are controversial and probably indeterminable, but there is no pressing reason to doubt the traditional attribution to Jeremiah himself. The context and content of the prophecy suggest that it comes from a time shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. See also NEW COVENANT.

 It should first be noted that in the ancient concepts of covenant the ultimate curse for breach of covenant was the destruction and scattering of the body politic with which the covenant initially was formed. This had happened in 586 B.C. Thus the old covenant was no more—theoretically, there was no longer any body politic to which the covenant would apply. Therefore, if there was to be any continuity in the relationships between Yahweh and the former members of the body politic, it would have to be through the enactment of a new covenant with the people, not with a political organization through its king.

 Thus the prophecy of the new covenant actually presupposed conditions much like those at the end of the LB Age, the time of the old Sinai covenant, in which there was likewise no body politic with which the covenant could be established. It was *persons,* not social organizations, who would receive the benefits and accept the obligations involved in the relationship with God. The “house of Judah and the house of Israel” (31:31) are deliberate uses of terminology deriving from family life, not from that of political institutions.

 The substance of the prophecy itself emphasizes the discontinuity from the old covenant traditions. There is barely any formal similarity to the old Sinai covenant structure. As always, the covenant is granted by the divine sovereign, but there is no historical prologue—the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah was doubtless too painful a memory. Instead there is a prediction of the *future* acts of God, which consist not of the normal expectations of riches, territory, long life, health, and progeny, but rather of “forgiveness” (i.e., the restoration of a broken relationship; v 34). The restoration of the relationship with God is the only benefit mentioned. There are neither oath, nor curses and blessings, nor witnesses, nor any of the paraphernalia of externally enacted covenants (deposit, public reading, ratification rituals, etc.).

 The single element of the Sinai old covenant retained in this “new covenant” is simply the stipulations (which are characteristically absent in divine charters). But no longer are they a set of prohibitions and injunctions, no code of laws or externally enforced and legalistically defined body of “commandments, statutes, and ordinances” such as depicted in the Deuteronomistic History. Instead the *tôrâ* (“teaching”) of Yahweh “will be written on their hearts” (not on tablets of stone) and “placed in their inward parts” (v 33). It is a description of the complete internalization of the divine will that makes unnecessary the entire machinery of external enforcement. [Vol. 1, p. 1,193]

**Excepts from** ABD article on “New Covenant’

**NEW COVENANT** [Heb *bĕrı̂t ḥădāšâ* בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה]. A phrase appearing in Jer 31:31, and only there in the OT, which denotes the basis on which a future relationship between God and his people will rest following the collapse of the Mosaic covenant and Israel’s loss of nationhood in 587 B.C. This new relationship, which God himself will create, is anticipated in other terms by Jeremiah and also by Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, and Malachi. The new covenant forms the centerpiece of a larger eschatological hope which includes a new act of salvation, a new Zion, and a new Davidic king. The belief in a new covenant existed among the Essenes of Qumran, but it was the Christian Church that laid real claim to Jeremiah’s promise, establishing the new covenant finally as its charter of faith. In the NT the phrase “new covenant” appears in Luke 22:20, in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6), and in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; “fresh covenant” in 12:24).

**A. Old Testament**

 The new covenant prophecy in Jer 31:31–34 is one of four brief eschatological utterances that conclude an earlier edition of Jeremiah’s Book of Comfort (chaps. 30–31). A rhetorical structure calls attention to the eschatological nature of these utterances (“Behold the days are coming” in 31:27, 31, 38; cf. 30:3), and indicates that the promised future will contain both continuity and discontinuity with [Vol. 4, p. 1,089]  the past (*ʿôd,* “again” in 31:23, 39; and *lōʾ ... ʿôd,* “not … again” in 31:29, 34a, 34b, 40; cf. Lundbom 1975: 32–36). Discontinuity gets the accent in the new covenant passages. Whereas the *tôrâ* remains in the new covenant and the obligation to comply with its demands still exists, conditions for compliance are vastly improved because Yahweh promises to write his *tôrâ* on the human heart.

 Scholars have considered two major questions when discussing the concept of a “new” covenant: (1) whether this covenant really is “new,” and (2) whether the Mosaic covenant over against which the new covenant is compared continues to be viable.

…

**B. Literature of Judaism Including Qumran**

 In postexilic Judaism the covenant idea contains all the ambiguity characterizing the larger eschatological hope generally. National life has been reconstructed along the old lines, which is to say the Mosaic covenant is again [Vol. 4, p. 1,090]  central and the Law (Torah) occupies a position of supremacy. In Nehemiah 9–10 a “faith covenant” (*ʾămānâ* in 10:1—Eng 9:38) is made to walk according to Yahweh’s *tôrâ* given through Moses. Ezra prays that the people will thereby return to the “faithful heart” of Abraham (9:7–8). At the same time a new covenant is looked for in the future, at which time the Messianic Age will dawn. Bar 2:35 speaks of an everlasting covenant which will secure Israel’s tenure in the land. In *Jubilees,* where the Law has eternal validity and the Messianic Age is thought to have already begun, an everlasting covenant is described in which the people on their part will confess sin, and God on his part will create a holy spirit in the people and will cleanse them (*Jub.* 1:22–24).

 Among the Essenes at Qumran the new covenant finds fulfillment in a separated community *(yḥd)* which believes it is living in the “last days.” This community has important similarities to the early Church. Members of the Qumran community swore an oath to uphold a covenant variously described as a “covenant of God,” an “everlasting covenant,” a “covenant of repentance,” a “covenant of steadfast love” *(ḥsd),* and a “new covenant.”

…

**C. New Testament**

 The Christian Church, from earliest times, claimed the promise of Jer 31:31–34 and understood itself to be the people of the new covenant. It also thought of itself as a new people (1 Pet 2:1–10): Israel reborn, but a more inclusive Israel to which gentiles now belong. It comes as somewhat of a surprise then to find so little said in the NT about a new covenant. G. E. Wright (1971: 986) attributes the paucity of references to legalistic connotations which the term “covenant” had in the NT period. He says “covenant” had come to mean almost exclusively obedience to the law; for this reason NT writers were uncomfortable with the term, using it only to point out that in Christ the covenant was not law but faith or life in the Spirit. NT rhetoric at this point contrasts sharply with Jewish rhetoric and rhetoric found in the Essene sectarian documents from Qumran.

 The words “new covenant” are placed on the lips of Jesus only in the longer text of Luke 22:20, where, at the [Vol. 4, p. 1,091]  Last Supper Jesus passes the wine and says, “This cup … is the new covenant in my blood.” Scholarly opinion is divided about the originality of this reading, though the longer text does have wide support. This Lucan text, in any case, depends most likely upon 1 Cor 11:25, where Paul cites a Last Supper tradition antedating him, perhaps reflecting usage in the Antioch Church (Jeremias 1955: 127–31): “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Mark 14:24 records Jesus’ words as, “This is my blood of the covenant,” a modification in the direction of Exod 24:8 (*TDNT* 2: 133; Richardson 1958: 230; cf. Heb 9:20). Matt 26:28 adds “for the forgiveness of sins,” which is new covenant language from Jer 31:34 (Dodd 1953: 45). In some ancient mss both the Mark and Matthew texts have the word “new” added. Some form-critics conclude that neither “new” nor “covenant” was spoken by Jesus (*BTNT* 146; Jeremias 1955: 110–15), which is to say the Last Supper liturgy was originally more brief and in each of the synoptic passages has undergone expansion. Even in its most radical reconstruction, the Last Supper liturgy clearly conveys the idea that Jesus’ death, or his shedding of blood, seals the new covenant which God now makes with humankind. Sacrificial terminology from Exod 24:3–8, all but absent in the Prophets (but see Zech 9:11), has come to dominate the covenant idea where it takes on fresh new meaning.

 Paul refers to himself and the Corinthian laity as “ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6) where Jer 31:31–34 appears to be in the back of his mind. This covenant has found expression in the *hearts* of the Corinthians, wherein the “Spirit of the living God” resides (vv 2–3). It therefore contrasts with the “old covenant” of Moses (vv 14–15) which was written on stone (v 3).

 Paul might have said more about the new covenant were it not for his concern to establish a more ancient base than Jer 31:31–34 for the new faith in Christ. The important promise for Paul is the one given to Abraham, that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Paul grounds the blessings through Christ in the Abrahamic covenant so they may apply equally to Jews and gentiles (Gal 3:14). Paul must short-circuit the Mosaic covenant if he is to realize his goal of evangelizing the gentiles, for the Mosaic covenant was made only with Israel (cf. Rom 9:4; Eph 2:11–13). Moreover, the Mosaic covenant contains the law which is now a burden to everybody—Jew and gentile. In Paul’s view the law only brings people under its curses. But Christ, by dying on the cross, becomes himself a curse which redeems those under the law who have faith in him (Gal 3:10–14). The new covenant, therefore, contains only blessings which makes it just like the Abrahamic covenant. The Mosaic covenant serves Paul only for the purpose of making a contrast with the Abrahamic covenant. In his allegory in Gal 4:21–31, Paul sees the Abrahamic covenant (fulfilled through Sarah) leading to freedom, sonship, and the Jerusalem above; the covenant made at Sinai (called Hagar) leads to present Jerusalem, i.e., the Jews and Judaizers, and thus slavery.

…END OF ABD QUOTATIONS…